"I believe in building people up": A call for attention to asset-based community development in geographical framings of poverty in the global North

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ARTICLE

'I believe in building people up': A call for attention to asset-based community development in geographical framings of poverty in the global North

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Abstract

This paper calls for human geographers examining poverty in the global North to attend more to asset-based community development (ABCD) poverty interventions in order to complement geographers' current foci on how people experience and respond to poverty. ABCD is a community movement that originated in the USA that emphasises principles of focusing on gifts and assets rather than deficits, and on relationships at the neighbourhood level. In doing so, ABCD starts from what is 'strong' rather than 'wrong' in order to work towards community transformation. This paper's focus on ABCD emerges from an ethnography with a community following ABCD on an estate in Birmingham, UK. The housing estate in which the ethnography was conducted is an area of relatively high UK deprivation. However, the ethnography drew out how, through ABCD intertwined with a Christian ethos, local volunteers and community workers endeavoured to reframe the questions being asked of and by the community in order to focus on people's gifts, foster neighbour-to-neighbour support, and shun stigma. In conclusion, the paper argues that giving more attention to ABCD poverty interventions will complement human geographers' existing attention to poverty in the global North by broadening our foci, including to question whether ABCD interventions could be used more widely to combat both the existence and experience of poverty. However, this comes with a warning: in giving more attention to assets, we must be careful to avoid romanticising poverty, and so this must be alongside existing geographical attention to austerity and welfare provision.

KEYWORDS
asset-based community development, COVID-19 pandemic, ethnography, gifts, poverty

1 ⎪ INTRODUCTION

Geographers have long recognised that poverty is difficult to define, partly because poverty is a relative term, meaning that there are questions around how and through whom poverty can be understood (Milbourne, 2010). This paper calls for human geographers examining poverty in the global North to attend more to asset-based community development (ABCD) poverty interventions in order to complement geographers' current foci on how people experience and respond to poverty with more attention to assets.

Asset-based community development is a community movement that originated in the USA and focuses on neighbourhood-level gifts and assets to work towards community transformation by local people (McKnight & Block, 2012; Russell, 2020). An asset in this context refers to strengths in a local community, including people and their skills (Russell, 2020). This paper's focus on ABCD emerges from an ethnography with a community following ABCD on an estate in Birmingham, UK. While the research aimed to understand how Christians on the estate were responding to poverty, spending time with church leaders, community workers, and local residents showed that asking about poverty was not addressing the focus of their work because they started from assets to transform the local community's high level of deprivation. Inspired by this ethnography, this paper's contribution to human geography is to argue that giving more attention to ABCD poverty interventions will complement human geographers' existing attention to poverty in the global North by broadening our foci, including to question whether ABCD interventions could be used more widely to combat both the existence and experience of poverty. However, this comes with a warning to geographers: in giving more attention to assets, we must be careful to avoid romanticising poverty, and so this must be alongside existing attention to debates over austerity and welfare provision.

In the remainder of this paper, I first explore dominant approaches to poverty in the global North in human geography before turning to a more detailed understanding of ABCD. I then expand on the ethnography undertaken before analysing how need and assets were understood on the estate, and the difference that a greater focus on ABCD poverty interventions makes to geographers for understanding how people experience and respond to poverty.

2 ⎪ DOMINANT APPROACHES TO POVERTY IN THE GLOBAL NORTH IN HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

There has been extensive research across human geography on poverty in the global North, but little direct attention to ABCD. In this section I briefly explore some of the dominant approaches in human geography to poverty in the global North in order to ground what could be learnt from ABCD to complement these approaches. Geographical attention to poverty in the global North has combined qualitative and quantitative approaches across a range of sub-disciplines from health geographies to urban and rural studies, food geographies, and beyond (for example, Garthwaite & Bambra, 2017; Hulme & McKay, 2005).

Austerity has been a key frame of geographical attention to poverty over the last two decades as countries responded to the 2008 financial crash (for example, on lived experiences of austerity across Europe, see the edited collection by Hall et al., 2020). Geographers' attention includes the everyday impacts of austerity (for example, on care, support, and mobility for experiences of austerity in the UK, see Hall, 2019; and on the absence and presence of austerity in people's daily lives, see Hitchen & Raynor, 2020) and the politics of austerity (for example, on the role of austerity in the atmospheres at foodbanks, see Denning, 2021; and on austerity and the production of ignorance in society on welfare reforms, see Slater, 2012). Closely related to austerity is geographers' attention to poverty and inequality (for example, on nationwide inequality in the UK, see Dorling, 2019), including the unequal impact of austerity measures in countries across the world (for example, on health inequalities in the UK, see Garthwaite & Bambra, 2017).

Another key area of geographers' attention to poverty has focused on the relationship between national governments and welfare provision (for example, reviewing the geographies of welfare, see Milbourne, 2010). In the last decade this has included an emphasis on voluntary sector responses to poverty as voluntary sector provision has risen exponentially to respond to rising poverty levels across the global North (for example, on voluntary sector responses in the short and long term, see Denning, 2019; and on the impact of the UK government's Big Society initiative, see Williams, 2012). In the UK context this has included debates over the contentious relationship between the government and voluntary sector as a shadow welfare state (for example, DeVerteuil et al. (2020) questioned the relationship between the voluntary sector and shadow state, and argued that voluntary sector provision often maps onto areas of high deprivation in urban, inner city areas).

A third significant area of geographers' recent attention to poverty in the global North has been in relation to the rise in food poverty, food insecurity, and food justice, particularly across Europe (for example, the edited collection on food charity in Europe in Lambie-Mumford & Silvasti, 2020) and North America (for example, warning of institutionalisation of foodbanking in the USA, see Riches, 2018). Examples here include work on people's right to food as a legal right to food that is available, accessible, and adequate (for example, Dowler & O'Connor, 2012) and the right to food in relation to community organising (for example, on community resilience and food insecurity, see Blake, 2019), as well as wider community food poverty responses (for example, on foodscapes in Canada to emphasise the spatiality of food systems at the neighbourhood level, see Miewald & McCann, 2014; and on community growing responses in South Wales, see Sonnino & Hanmer, 2016). Food banks across the global North have also been a key focus of attention here, with examples in the UK examining quantitative analyses of the rise in food bank use and benefit sanctions (for example, Loopstra et al., 2018), as well as ethnographies on people's everyday experiences of food banks (for example, Garthwaite, 2016), power at play at food banks (for example, Strong, 2019), and the complex positioning of volunteers at food banks (for example, May et al., 2019).

Overall, the geographical attention to poverty in the global North is wide-ranging in its approach and foci, with just some examples cited here in the areas of austerity, welfare provision, and food poverty. This paper argues that geographers have not given sufficient attention to ABCD poverty interventions for understanding how people experience and respond to poverty. This is not to say that the above foci do not consider assets. Rather, while assets are within the mix of geographers' understandings of poverty, if we give specific attention to how communities are engaging with ABCD, as the analysis of this paper shows, then this adds a different way that people are experiencing and responding to poverty compared to, for example, the traditional food bank. This complements geographers' current foci because ABCD poverty interventions sit within the wider contexts of austerity, welfare provision, and the government policies on poverty, and rising levels of food poverty. I now turn to ABCD to expand on its rationale before turning to the methodology of engaging with an ABCD-based poverty intervention, and analysing the occurrence of ABCD on an outer city estate in Birmingham.

3 | ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (ABCD)

In this section I will give an overview of the key principles of ABCD; this does not intend to be an exhaustive review of community development literature. ABCD is a movement that began in the second half of the twentieth century in the USA, primarily through McKnight and Kretzmann. ABCD is a community movement rather than an exacting rulebook that aims to find a different way of living compared to consumerism, which ABCD proponents argue cannot give people or communities satisfaction (McKnight & Block, 2012). However, ABCD is not synonymous with community organising, which traditionally focuses on common causes and oppositions within a community (McKnight & Block, 2012).

Asset-based community development has a particular understanding of community that focuses on the neighbourhood level and neighbour-to-neighbour relationships rather than prioritising the role of institutions (Mather, 2018; Russell, 2020). Russell explains this understanding of community as:

> A group of people who, regardless of the diversity in their backgrounds, have been able to accept and transcend their differences, enabling them to communicate effectively and openly and work together toward goals that they themselves have identified as being for their common good. (2011, p. 10)

This ABCD understanding of community therefore emphasises effective communication between people in order that they work together towards a common goal. Building on this, a further key element of ABCD is the focus on assets and gifts rather than deficits (Mather, 2018; McKnight & Block, 2012; Russell, 2020). In ABCD there is therefore a focus on abundance; each person in a community has the capacity to provide and people are responsible for one another (McKnight & Block, 2012).

However, despite claiming that for a community 'What we have is enough' (McKnight & Block, 2012, p. 66), ABCD does not simply accept injustice. Rather, it changes the starting point from which to address injustice:

> The answer, at least in part, is to start with what's strong, not what's wrong, then to liberate what's strong to address what's wrong, and to make what's strong even stronger. (Russell, 2020, p. xiii)

As the name implies, focusing on assets has been a key tenet of ABCD since its inception, and makes ABCD a distinct approach when community projects are often asked by funders to show their need and in doing so to focus on deficits

(Kretzmann, 1995). Instead, by focusing on assets, ABCD places importance on the power of local networks and bottom-up change, and is a place-based approach (Russell, 2020). This results in ABCD having a different approach to service provision compared, for example, to providing food through a food bank: ABCD is about doing *with* individuals and communities, rather than doing *to* or *for* (Russell, 2020). This makes ABCD distinct from charitable provision because, as McKnight and Block argue, generosity is different to charity: 'Charity says, "You have not earned this; I am giving it to you because you have so few gifts"' (2012, p. 85). McKnight and Block argue that charity is demeaning because it focuses on deficiency in one half of an exchange, whereas generosity goes both ways in a transaction. Cumulatively then, the focus on assets, gifts, neighbours, and local networks results in ABCD being an approach that flips the focus in community development: it is not about seeing people and communities as problems that need fixing, but rather from starting from people's gifts (Russell, 2020).

Asset-based community development's emphasis on the neighbourhood level and bottom-up change raises a question about the relationship between ABCD and governments. It has been argued that ABCD does not leave space for action in relation to governments, and that ABCD hence advocates privatisation and reduces the role of the welfare state (MacLeod & Emejulu, 2014). ABCD is therefore not without criticism, and advocating that ABCD is given attention by geographers is not a panacea. However, in response to this criticism, Russell and McKnight made it clear that ABCD is about connections between people, not individuals in isolation, and that being opposed to the dominance of professionals does not equate to opposing the state (Russell, 2016). For Russell (2011), ABCD should therefore occur relationally to governments and civic action should interact with democracy, in part to hold governments accountable – for example, in calling out the negative impact of austerity and its focus on deficits in communities (Russell, 2020) – and rather than replacing government activity, ABCD asks that governments support local collective action (Mathie et al., 2017).

Overall, ABCD therefore presents a particular approach to community that can be a response to poverty, but is often not labelled as such. Geographical attention to poverty has not considered ABCD in depth. This paper draws on research that engaged with a community following ABCD in order to argue that geographers attend more to ABCD poverty interventions.

4 | METHODOLOGY

This paper's focus on ABCD emerges from an ethnography on the Firs and Bromford estate in Hodge Hill, an outer city estate in Birmingham in the UK. On the estate, community workers and volunteers at Hodge Hill Church, Open Door Community Foundation (based on the estate in a building called 'The Hub'), and the charity and social enterprise Worth Unlimited work together to implement ABCD.

The ethnography began in February 2020 with attendance at community gatherings. After each visit I kept a diary of my observations and reflections. As the COVID-19 pandemic hit, having visited the estate for 5 weeks, the ethnography was forced to move online to participation in video calls with the Street Connector volunteers. From May to October 2020, there were telephone/video call semi-structured interviews with nine local volunteers and community workers, a focus group with seven local people planning a new pantry, and two focus groups with photo elicitation – one with four Street Connectors and one with seven community workers. As some people participated in both interviews and focus groups, this gave 22 research participants in total, plus others who I met and spoke with informally during the in-person ethnography.

The research aimed to understand how Christians on the estate were responding to poverty, but the combination of ethnography with semi-structured interviews and focus groups was important because the ethnography highlighted the importance of ABCD on the estate and that poverty and deprivation language was not commonly used by the people I met. This paper's focus on ABCD therefore emerges directly from the ethnography through people's focus on assets. Stand-alone interviews with pre-set questions without the ethnography would not have emphasised ABCD to the same extent.

The estate was not somewhere I had been prior to the research so I was recognised as 'new' in a close-knit community, meaning my presence for research purposes was always explained to people I met during the ethnography in person and online. Interview and focus group participants were primarily identified through one of the community workers at the Hub who had extensive connections and knowledge of the community. While this could have limited the views shared in the research, he and I worked together to recruit participants for the interviews and focus groups who were diverse in both their experiences and backgrounds. All research participants were fully briefed on the research and were given the option of anonymity, although none chose this and so names are included with interview and focus group extracts below. Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded before being transcribed and thematically coded in NVivo. The analysis

in this paper is based on moments experienced at gatherings, and reflections shared in interviews and focus groups. It therefore cannot claim to be representative of the whole estate or to speak for members of the community.

5 | NEED AND ASSETS ON THE ESTATE

This section begins with an analysis of need on the Firs and Bromford estate. The ethnography drew out how need was not community workers′ and local residents′ main focus; rather they focused more on assets and strengths in the community and fostered these through different gatherings. This is the focus of the second analysis section. Together these sections therefore show how we as geographers can benefit by complementing existing approaches to poverty in the global North by giving more attention to ABCD poverty interventions.

5.1 | Need on the estate

Statistically, the Firs and Bromford estate is in the top 10% of deprived areas in England (MHCLG, 2019), which arguably could be evidenced to the onlooker in the estate′s appearance, for example, with boarded-up shops and stereotypes of tower blocks. The interviews and focus groups began by asking about people′s perceptions of levels of need on the estate in the last decade. The majority of people asked thought that need on the estate had increased in the last decade, while a small minority pointed to small improvements in the deprivation indices.

When asked about the causes of need, people′s responses were wide ranging but largely related to the UK government, for example, low income from benefits, benefit changes (in particular Universal Credit), decline in support services, poor housing, as well as different needs such as language barriers following immigration, the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and mental health. Need was often associated with stigma:

> In communities like ours, feeling both doubly stigmatised that somehow they′re made out to be the problem; they′re the drain on the state. While at the same time being punished through punitive benefits sanctions through removal of vital services. (Al, Vicar, interview, 10 June 2020)

While this need was related to the last decade of austerity, community worker Paul added:

> I think this estate has always been neglected, left behind, forgotten, under resourced ... the cuts were already here way before the [austerity] cuts. (Paul, Street Connector mentor, focus group, 17 June 2020)

Indeed, austerity was not a word used in people′s everyday language, with local resident Jim commenting: 'I really don′t know what it is, I think it sounds like a posh word that the government use' (Interview, 8 June 2020). However, when austerity was framed in interviews as government spending cuts, then people related to the negative impact of austerity on the estate employment: 'Austerity meant to me an attack on the working man' (Pete, Hub volunteer, interview, 7 October 2020). Participants′ reflections drew out the unequal impact of austerity with benefit claimants affected more than those in relatively secure employment. Mirroring accounts of austerity found by geographers across the UK, this is a microcosm of the unequal impact of austerity in the UK, and overall people living on the estate will have been affected more negatively by austerity than people who live in wealthier areas.

This paints a pessimistic picture of life on the Firs and Bromford estate, and if conversations had stopped at this point then the argument and conclusions of this paper would have been very different. However, early on the ethnography identified the need to ask about ABCD and the implications of this approach on the estate. The next section turns to this to show what geographers can gain by giving more attention to ABCD interventions alongside current foci in researching poverty in the global North.

5.2 | Assets and need on the estate

Local residents (community workers and volunteers) did not deny need on the estate but reframed this through ABCD to focus on responding to 'need for connection' and 'ensuring that people have as much dignity and capacity' (Ria, Together

for families worker, focus group, 7 June 2020). To reframe the narrative of and on the estate, the language of need was therefore not commonly used, as local resident and Street Connector Clare explained:

> Look at the good in the area, our blessings, we are really blessed. We are a little council estate, always been known as a council estate and there's always been a stigma about it. But if you stay on the estate and meet people you'll find absolutely amazing people. (Focus group, 12 May 2020)

Following the principles of ABCD (McKnight & Block, 2012; Russell, 2020), the approach on the estate fostered through Open Door Community, Worth Unlimited, and Hodge Hill Church is to focus on strengths rather than deficits, to value everyone and the gifts that they have and can contribute, and overall to change the narrative of seeing people as a problem (Russell, 2020), which as discussed in the previous section was linked to the (perceived) causes of need:

> I think what there isn't an understanding about is how disempowering poverty is and how poverty removes your innate sense of self-worth and your sense of capacity. Which is why we used asset-based approaches, cause it's about helping people re-believe in themselves and believe that they've got capacity and skills and gifts to offer. (Tim, Director of Worth Unlimited, focus group, 17 June 2020)

This is an important point for geographers researching poverty; ABCD interventions aim to counter the downward spiral that can occur from experiencing poverty, both in people's daily lives and for generations to come (for example, Hall, 2023). By attending more to ABCD poverty interventions geographers can therefore highlight how some communities are countering poverty, and therefore further use research to work towards reducing levels of poverty across the global North.

To further understand the impact that ABCD made on the estate to combat the existence and experience of poverty, I now turn to three of the gatherings on the estate that typified the ABCD approach of 'community building' rather than 'doing to' (Tim, Director of Worth Unlimited, focus group, 17 June 2020). They purposely used the language of 'gatherings' rather than 'projects' because as Janey (Co-leader of the East Birmingham and North Solihull branch of Worth Unlimited, focus group, 17 June 2020) explained, the latter are often negatively time and money constrained.

First, at weekly Open Door drop-in and advice sessions at the Hub, volunteers provided support with questions from CV writing to benefit queries, a solicitor provided advice monthly, people could use laptops, and hot drinks followed by lunch for a small donation fostered relationships: 'it came a gathering of friends' (Penny, volunteer, interview, 5 October 2020). The atmosphere was different to a formal advice centre:

> The atmosphere was busy and yet to some extent laid back – people could come and go as they wanted, there was no official waiting list. (Researcher's diary, 11 February 2020)

The gathering was therefore more about people helping each other than an expert and people needing help. Second, an important initiative for ABCD on the estate was the Street Connectors – local residents who went knocking door-to-door to foster connections between neighbours and grow current and new gatherings: 'And that's how we look at people, gifts and skills, it's all over Bromford and we're the ones who go and find it' (Clare, Street Connector, focus group, 12 May 2020). The Street Connectors therefore consciously focused on building assets in the local community and received ABCD training to foster this approach.

Inclusion was important at a third gathering that was being planned in 2020 to launch in 2021 at Hodge Hill Church: a pantry where people would pay £4/week in return for around £30 worth of food. The decision to establish a pantry was purposeful: 'it's demeaning having to go to a foodbank ... [whereas at the pantry] you're not getting charity' (Pete, focus group, 22 October 2020). Another pantry planner, Allannah added to this: 'I like the idea of people not just receiving but actually being ... I believe in building people up.' This is central to enacting ABCD: as previously noted, charity is different to generosity (McKnight & Block, 2012), and so the pantry aspired to share and foster gifts. Community support development worker Lucy explained this further: 'it's a new space to grow new adventures and community, and friendships and relationships and projects, and creativity' (focus group, 22 October 2020). The pantry would be open to anyone to reduce stigma of going and aimed to organically result in new connections and gatherings.

These three gatherings were therefore distinct from more widespread approaches to tackling poverty such as food banks. They show the benefit to the local community of the ABCD approach to challenge stigma and the downward spiral that can be associated with living in poverty. This begs the question of how aware people on the estate were of ABCD. In the interviews and focus groups with community workers (the majority of whom were local residents),

volunteers, and people who attended gatherings at the Hub, it was the community workers and Street Connector volunteers who were consciously aware of ABCD. However, where others were not explicitly aware of ABCD, their reflections on the Hub and local community emphasised connections and positivity at Hub gatherings (for example, 'they're like a second family' (JoJo, local resident, interview, 2 October 2020) and 'people in this area cannot do enough for you' (Sahra, local resident and Street Connector, interview, 8 June 2020)), which echoed the principles of ABCD.

However, we have already established that geographers have long researched the relationship between poverty and government policy, including austerity. So if geographers give more attention to ABCD poverty interventions, how does this fit alongside research aiming to influence government policy and work for long-term change on the causes of poverty? Janey from Worth Unlimited explained that it was important through ABCD how advocacy is undertaken:

> Enable that person to tell their story in such a way that gives them dignity and then actually when they've got that confidence it's then together ... that enables us to campaign. (Focus group, 17 June 2020)

The ABCD focus to poverty therefore did not deny that needs existed, but changed the starting point for understanding poverty, responding to need, and in turn for advocacy:

> It's about how people associate with each other ... that then gives you strength to say what is it that we can do together to meet need and what is it what we can do together to campaign for change. (Tim, Director of Worth Unlimited, focus group, 17 June 2020)

This echoes Russell (2020, p. xiii) in the USA on using what is 'strong' to address what is 'wrong'. ABCD does not deny people have needs and live in poverty, but it changes the framing for how people relate to and value each other, which in turn changes the response to poverty, and how to campaign for long-term change. ABCD therefore adds an avenue of enquiry for geographers to explore further for research on poverty and reducing levels of inequality across the global North.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this paper has argued that human geographers need to attend more to ABCD poverty interventions. This will complement geographers' current foci in understanding how people experience and respond to poverty in the global North, including in the contexts of austerity, welfare provision, and food poverty. The ethnography on the outer-city estate in Birmingham that this paper draws on shows that ABCD poverty interventions have a different starting point for responding to poverty compared to a more traditional intervention such as a food bank; they focus on people's gifts and assets in a community in order to build connections. In doing so, ABCD interventions aim to counter the downward spiral that can occur from experiencing poverty in people's daily lives and for generations to follow. This is an important interaction between ACBD interventions and geographers' attention to the legacies of austerity.

Three implications for human geography follow from this conclusion. First, if geographers broaden current debates on poverty by attending more to the places, spaces, and people in ABCD poverty interventions then we can question whether ABCD interventions could be utilised more widely in communities to work towards combatting the existence of poverty by reducing levels of poverty and inequality in the global North.

Second, more geographical attention to ABCD interventions will have the implication of following ABCD's approach to combat the experience of poverty by challenging stigma and the downward spiral that can be associated with living in poverty. This is not to say that geographical attention to poverty does not already do this. Rather, more attention to ABCD provides an opportunity to take this further. By extension, this will help human geographers to further counter false stereotypes of poverty, for example, as portrayed in the media.

However, in giving more attention to ABCD poverty interventions, we also need to be careful to avoid romanticising poverty; there is a delicate balance to be struck in researching poverty. The third implication for geographers from this paper is therefore that giving more attention to ABCD poverty interventions needs to be integrated alongside existing attention to austerity and welfare provision.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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